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# Trailmaking on the Frontier

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## Trailmaking on the Frontier

On July 2, 1820, a small force of men set out from Council Bluff, Nebraska, to discover a practicable route for traveling between that post and Camp Coldwater which had just been established at the mouth of the St. Peter's (Minnesota) River. Led by Captain Matthew J. Magee of the rifle regiment, the party consisted of fifteen soldiers, four servants, an Indian guide, his squaw and papoose, eight mules, and seven horses. Captain Magee was assisted by Lieutenant Andrew Talcott of the engineers. Accompanying the expedition unofficially were Captain Stephen Watts Kearny of the Second Infantry, Lieutenant-Colonel Willoughby Morgan and Lieutenant Charles Pentland of the rifle regiment, and another junior officer.

Descending the Missouri River to Manuel Lisa's post, the expedition crossed and encamped on the east bank of the Boyer River a mile from its mouth. The weather was so stormy that the men found it difficult to manage the boat during their crossing of the Missouri. A terrific rain storm accompanied by thunder and lightning made the first night in the Iowa country extremely unpleasant.

On the following morning the company began



its march up the Boyer Valley. On the right stretched a high broken bluff, while well timbered, gently swelling hills lay beyond the broad ravine on the left. By one o'clock the ravine was crossed and the party halted to "feed" on a deer that one of the men had shot. Night found them encamped in the vicinity of the present site of Logan, having gone about fifteen miles that day.

At six o'clock on the morning of the Fourth of July, the party left camp. For twelve miles they trailed over rolling prairies, up the valley of the Boyer River to a point near where Woodbine is now located, which they reached shortly after noon. After proceeding eight miles farther they halted near the site of Dunlap in northeastern Harrison County. "This day being the anniversary of our Independence," wrote Kearny in his journal, "we celebrated it, to the extent of our means; an extra gill of whiskey was issued to each man, & we made our dinner on pork & biscuit & drank to the memory of our forefathers in a *mint julup*."

The next morning Kearny found to his chagrin that the heavy dews which fell in western Iowa left his blankets "as wet as if they had been thrown into the river." By seven o'clock, however, the troop was on its way. Kearny, being in advance of the party, rode to the top of a high bluff where he was "attacked by a swarm of small wasps, with yellow wings & very small heads & not being dis-



posed to contest the point, for the dominion of that tract, of which they were the previous Inhabitants," he beat a hasty retreat but not before he was severely stung by several of the insects.

The Boyer River was forded near the present site of Dow City from whence the route led northward over a "continuation of very high, broken hills, with no timber, & but indifferent soil." That evening they halted on a small creek after having travelled twenty-one miles. The night was cool and Kearny found three blankets "by no means uncomfortable," but swarms of mosquitoes proved very troublesome despite Lieutenant Talcott's "*mosquito net*."

Soon after seven o'clock the next morning the expedition was again ascending and descending high hills with no indication of timber — not even a single tree. The dull monotony of the landscape was "occasionally interrupted by the feats of *Horsemanship* displayed by our squaw, & the affection & gallantry shewn toward her & her Papoose (an infant of but Four months old) by the Indian Guide." Four of the soldiers pursued unsuccessfully a "*gang of elk*" that had been observed a mile from camp near the present site of Odebolt.

The scarcity of timber caused Captain Magee to set out at 4 o'clock in the morning of July 7th and march ten miles along what is now the boundary of Sac and Ida counties before halting for breakfast.



Many elk were seen as the troopers rounded the headwaters of the Soldier River.

Captain Kearny rode a mile eastward the next morning to view the circular mound of the Sioux chief, Red Hawk. Wild game was abundant. Many elk were seen during the day but no one was able to approach near enough to shoot. At noon a large bull buffalo was sighted and a number set out in pursuit. Riding the fleetest horse, Captain Kearny fired three pistol balls into him at a range of ten feet. The chase continued for two miles when two more shots brought the mighty beast down. "He is very large, & would weigh a thousand weight," wrote the twenty-six year old captain proudly in his journal. "Sent back four mules to bring up the buffaloe, which some men have been left to butcher." Having come to some timber, they decided to encamp for they had traveled fifty-nine miles "without the use of wood, and with the exception of a single hill, without sight of any." After feasting that evening, Kearny was convinced that bison meat was "far preferable to our common beef."

The following morning the squaw was very sick in "consequence of eating too greedily of the Buffaloe." Camp had been pitched in latitude 42° 58', probably about three miles west of where Peterson is now located. There they remained until four o'clock in order to "jerk" the fresh meat before marching four miles farther to encamp near the site



of what is now Linn Grove on a little creek they christened "*Mary's Stream*." During the night it rained and the mosquitoes proved to be so "excessively annoying as almost to exhaust our patience."

In his journal for July 10th, Kearny noted "high hills, well covered with granite and limestone, & the scattered groves of box alder." He noticed "a gang of about 200 *she elks*, but they were too much alarmed, at our appearance, to suffer us to approach nearer than 400 yards to them." In the summer "the males and females run separately," he observed, "& the former shew, by far, much more curiosity, for they frequently come within 150 yards, to discover what we are." He also saw "some wolves & sand cranes, and crossed two or three of the Sioux trails, none, however, lately traveled; reached a fine sulphur spring, strongly impregnated, & halted for our dinner." In a driving rain which did not subside until daybreak the men pitched camp at a spot now in southeastern Clay County. The line of march that day had been almost due east because of the Indian guide's reluctance to cross the Little Sioux which had suddenly risen several feet.

Scattering stones of limestone, granite, and quartz were observed on July 11th as the expedition traveled over level prairie country. Ever alert to the plant and animal life about him, Captain Kearny saw "a large drove of Buffalo to our left,



probably 5 thousand," but did not molest them. Presently, however, they "fell upon a drove of about 100, to which several of us gave chase, & out of which a *yearling* was obtained, after a half mile chase." The main party was overtaken at "Elk Lake" (probably Lost Island Lake).

Refreshed by a night's sleep, Captain Magee ordered the expedition to set out at six o'clock in a northeasterly direction. Presently they came to the West Fork of the Des Moines River and forded without much difficulty near the present site of Emmetsburg. "About ten leagues [30 miles] to the N. West of our crossing place," Kearny relates, "is Spirit Lake, at the Head of Sioux river, respecting which the Indians have a curious tradition." Dinner was eaten on Medium Lake, after which the explorers continued ten miles over a "low, wet, & marshy" prairie, halting for the night on one of the numerous creeks emptying into the East Fork of the Des Moines.

The next morning they crossed the creek and ascended high prairies over which many large granite boulders and other stones were scattered. About noon they came to a marsh from which fresh water was obtained for dinner. "When about to proceed," Captain Kearny relates, they "saw a drove of 100 Buffaloe passing from N. to South a half mile in our rear. In the afternoon crossed many of their trails, & continuing our course nearly East, reached at Sun down an old



bed of a river with high banks, about a Quarter or half a mile wide, which with a little difficulty we crossed; the water & mire being occasionally *belly deep*, to our horses and mules." That evening, on a small stream which the guide declared to be the Little Blue Earth River, they spent the better part of two hours warding off the vicious and persistent assaults of swarms of mosquitoes.

A southeasterly course was taken the next morning and after traveling eighteen miles Lieutenant Talcott found their camp to be located in  $43^{\circ} 7'$  north latitude. This was probably in the vicinity of the present site of Britt. Steering north-eastward again through prairies of "indifferent soil," Captain Magee led his expedition between two extensive groves of timber. A buffalo cow weighing four hundred pounds was killed. The fresh meat was most welcome, for the "jerked beef" had spoiled and it was accordingly left behind for the wolves. Many rattlesnakes were seen and heard during the day but the Indian guide held little fear of them. Camp was pitched in the present vicinity of Forest City.

Sunday, July 16th, was "Sunshiny," and a cheery attitude prevailed among the men as they waded Lime Creek and took a northerly course over gently rolling prairies. Once they crossed a fresh trail over which a dozen Indians had passed the previous day. For several days Captain Magee had been doubtful of his Indian guide's ability to



lead them to the St. Peter's River. He often conferred with Morgan, Kearny, and Talcott and sometimes refused to heed the Indian's advice. According to Kearny, the guide was "chagrined & mortified at his own ignorance, & his squaw this evening was seen weeping, most piteously, & no doubt thro' fear least, as her *Lord & Master* has failed in his pledge of conducting us in a direct route to our point of destination, we should *play Indian* with him, viz. sacrifice him on the altar of his ignorance; A Tin of soup from our mess to the squaw quieted her apprehension & some kind words satisfied the Indians & they once more retired to their rest, apparently in good humor & spirits." This was the last day the expedition camped in Iowa, the exact location being in latitude 43° 29' about where Northwood is now situated.

Over low marshy ground, through scattering stretches of oak and underbrush, across wide ravines, Captain Magee pressed on vainly seeking to find the St. Peter's River. Early in the morning of July 18th they reached a river "20 yards wide, knee deep, with stony bottom, and running from N. to *South* with a current of a mile & a half an hour, & the handsomest stream of water we have seen, since we left the Bowyer." The Indian guide thought it was the St. Peter's but it was probably the Cedar near the site of Austin, Minnesota.

The provisions were almost exhausted. A party of four was sent out in search of wild game but



returned from an unsuccessful all day hunt. Gloomily the men retired to be awakened for the march at five o'clock the following morning. Weary and footsore they trudged for thirty-one miles over prairie and through woodlands. Night found them encamped near the present site of Rochester, Minnesota, "without wood, or water, & tho' supperless, & shelterless," they were all "soon lost in quiet repose."

That night it sprinkled but Captain Magee had his men on the march by four o'clock. For two miles they plodded over a rough country wet with the early morning dew and the rain of the previous night. They halted on the banks of a "handsome stream, 12 yards wide, sandy bottom, & 2 or 3 feet deep, for the purpose of cooking & eating." With unconcealed regret Kearny jotted down that "we here took a farewell meal on the last of our pork & bread," though a little parched corn was still preserved. They were encamped on a stream which Kearny described as "well bordered by oak, pine, white ash, & slippery elm." This was probably the Zumbro River in the neighborhood of Zumbro Falls, Minnesota, for Lieutenant Talcott found the latitude to be  $44^{\circ} 18'$ .

At noon the next day they halted for rest without water. By two o'clock they were again on the march. The officers uneasy, the men desperately in need of food, water, and rest, it was probably with no little joy that Kearny chronicled their ar-



rival at a "small drain of water, & having lately suffered much inconvenience from the want of it, we here filled our canteens & kegs." Two deer constituted the only game they had seen for several days, except geese and "many Prairie hens, but being armed only with rifles, & these hens not to be discovered in the grass, & only when flying," they were not able to shoot any. About four in the afternoon "when every one of the party was much fatigued with traveling, & almost exhausted by a scorching sun & empty stomachs," they saw the Mississippi river from a high ridge and, "with light hearts & quick steps," they "soon reached its water."

From some Sioux Indians they learned that they were at Lake Pepin. Having obtained some provisions from a boat across the river, it was unnecessary to butcher one of the mules, which the explorers would have done that evening, "a selection having been made" and their "appetites perfectly prepared."

A Sioux Indian guide was secured the next day and, striking out into some beautiful little valleys, they reached Red Wing's village up the Mississippi by sundown. During the day Kearny noted many pheasants, the first he had encountered since crossing the Allegheny Mountains. Great numbers of pigeons whirled about overhead and several were shot.

Red Wing, battle-scarred, proud, but friendly



to the Americans, cordially invited the soldiers to encamp in his village. According to Kearny, "some excuse was offered for our declining, on which occasion he was much chagrined & mortified, & expressing it to us & adding that no American had ever before shunned him, we accepted his invitation, & encamped near his *Wig Wams*; after which the officers were invited by him to a feast & seating ourselves alongside of him, his squaw handed each of us a bason of venison, boiled up with parched corn which we found exceedingly palatable." After eating heartily "we then returned to our camp, & were followed shortly after by him, accompanied by his squaw, bringing fish & a deer head. We gave him whisky & tea & making him a present of some tobacco, he retired, & we went to rest."

Although they were nearing their goal, the tempestuous weather together with the "buzzing & stinging of the mosquitoes" served to prevent many of the men from securing proper rest. Despite this handicap, however, they reached the fort at the mouth of the St. Peter's on July 25th in time for breakfast. There they were hospitably received by Colonel Henry Leavenworth and his wife who "were a little astonished at the sight of us, we having been the First Whites that ever crossed at such a distance from the Missouri to the Mississippi river."

"The Object of the exploring party which I



have accompanied," wrote Captain Kearny, "being to discover a practicable route for traveling" between Council Bluff and Camp Coldwater was counted a failure, for the course of their march he considered "not, in the least, adapted for that purpose." Possibly the hardships so recently experienced served to prejudice his opinion, but his reasons were stated emphatically. "Our circuitous & wavering route (which is to be attributed to the Guide's advice, being in direct contradiction to our opinion, & we being occasionally guided by the one, & then by the other); the immense Prairies we have crossed; the want of timber, which we for several days at a time experienced; the little water that in some parts were to be found; the high & precipitous Mountains & hills that we climbed over, render that road impracticable & almost impassable, for more than very small bodies. A very great portion of the country in the neighborhood of our route could be of no other object (at any time) to our gov't in the acquisition of it, than the expulsion of the savages from it, & the driving them nearer to the *N. West*, & the Pacific for the disadvantages (as above) will forever prevent its supporting more than a thinly scattered population. The soil generally we found good, but bears no comparison to that I saw between *Chariton* & *C. B.*"

For three days following their arrival at Camp Coldwater the weary men rested. The Falls of St.



Anthony did not strike Kearny as being as "majestic & grand" as he had been induced to believe by other travelers. One day they shot at some geese, and later fished with "great success" for several hours. July 28th was spent in inspecting the site upon which Fort Snelling was later erected.

It was nine o'clock on the morning of July 29th when the party embarked for St. Louis. Manned by twelve powerful oarsmen, their thirty-ton boat sped swiftly down the Mississippi. A thick fog blanketed the Mississippi the next morning when they weighed anchor at four o'clock at the mouth of the St. Croix. By noon they entered Lake Pepin, an expansion of the Mississippi twenty-two miles long and from one to three miles broad, which Kearny considered "very dangerous to navigate" because its waters were disturbed by the slightest wind. They did not reach the foot of the lake until eleven that night and then anchored in mid-stream.

At the foot of "Prairie Le Aisle" (Winona), they visited Wabasha's lodge. In a fluent speech accompanied by "graceful gestures," Wabasha declared he "did not relish the idea of the Whites being on the river above him." Night found them anchored near the site of Trempealeau, Wisconsin.

Sandbars delayed their progress on the following day, but at nine o'clock that night they were at



the mouth of the Upper Iowa River and were passing along the eastern border of Iowa. Seven hours later they drifted by the mouth of the Yellow River and arrived at Prairie du Chien on August 2nd. For two days they strolled about Fort Crawford and the village. One evening Kearny visited some "*Wig Wams*" and found a very pretty squaw who "fell into fits" during his visit.

Having traded their heavy boat for a lighter one "with 6 oarsmen," they left Prairie du Chien and sped by the Turkey River, below which they saw a deserted Sioux village of twenty lodges on the east bank. They saw "many Pelicans, which at a distance make a very handsome shew." Having no "cabouse" (open air cooking oven), they put to under a high bluff on the Iowa side near the present site of Waupeton to prepare supper. All efforts to "gig some fish" proved unavailing.

The next day they stopped at a settlement of traders "opposite a 'Fox village' of 17 lodges, & 100 Inhabitants" where they found Dr. Samuel C. Muir with his squaw and two children. On a high bluff nearby they saw a small building enclosing the remains of Julien Dubuque whose mines were then being worked by five or six Indians. At night they camped on a sandy beach now designated as Sand Prairie opposite Bellevue, where they "caught the largest Eel" Kearny ever saw.

On August 6th, against a "strong head wind," they pressed on. Kearny saw "on the W. shore



several deserted Lodges, & near them a furnace, where the 'Foxes' run their Lead, they having mines in this vicinity — Shortly afterwards passed the mouth of the 'Wapibisinekaw' [Wapsipinicon], about 150 yards wide, & flowing in to the Mississippi from the West." The soil in this region "is clay & the Prairie Bottoms are extending a mile from it, bounded by high hills well covered with timber, & shewing many beautiful situations for Farms & Buildings."

Kearny saw a Fox village of nineteen lodges near the site of the present town of Princeton. Five miles below they came to the head of the Rock Rapids which they descended with "little difficulty." They reached Fort Armstrong shortly after noon, having been "much opposed by strong Head winds, & a severe rain, which increased the difficulty of navigation thro' the Rapids, the current of which however we did not find more than 5 nots per hour."

"Having purchased, for Six bottles of whiskey, a Canoe, 25 feet long, & 2 broad," Kearny left Fort Armstrong at six o'clock on the morning of August 10th with Lieutenant-Colonel Morgan, Lieutenant Pentland, and two waiters. Their light canoe danced gaily downstream and at sundown they encamped a few miles below "Prairie [Muscatine] Island" near what is now Port Louisa.

It required two days to reach Fort Edwards. Although tormented by mosquitoes during the





From the Missouri Historical Society Collections  
STEPHEN WATTS KEARNY





*A Florida Scout. 1836*

*Riflemen & Trumpeter. 1843.*

*Lancer Fort...*





*Chief Bugler - Sergt Major. 1844.*



*One of the 'Forty' 1841.*

*E. FORBES.*



*1843.*



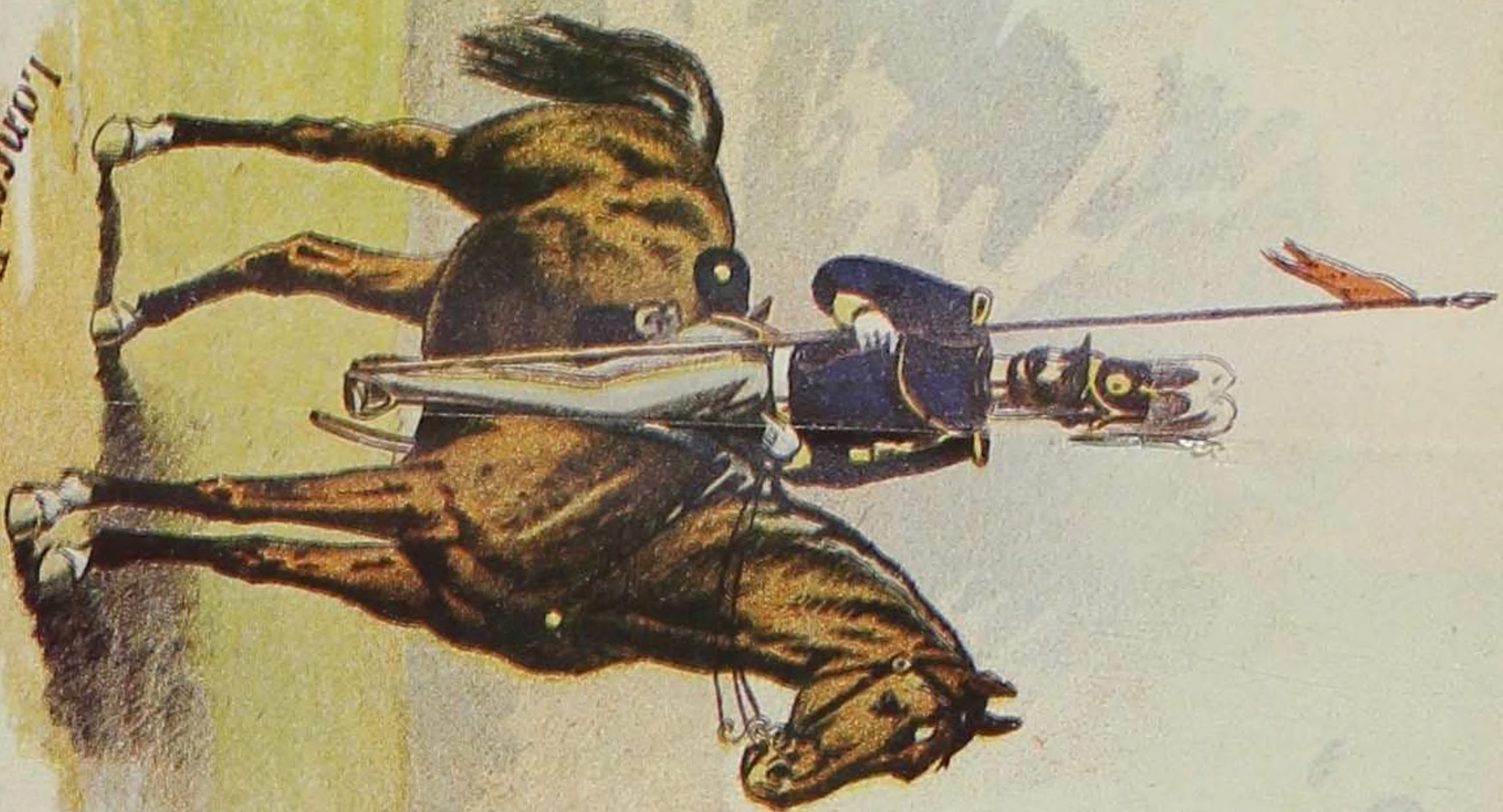
*A Florida Scout. 1836*



*Riflemen & Trimmer. 1843.*



*Lancer Fort Jessup. 1843.*

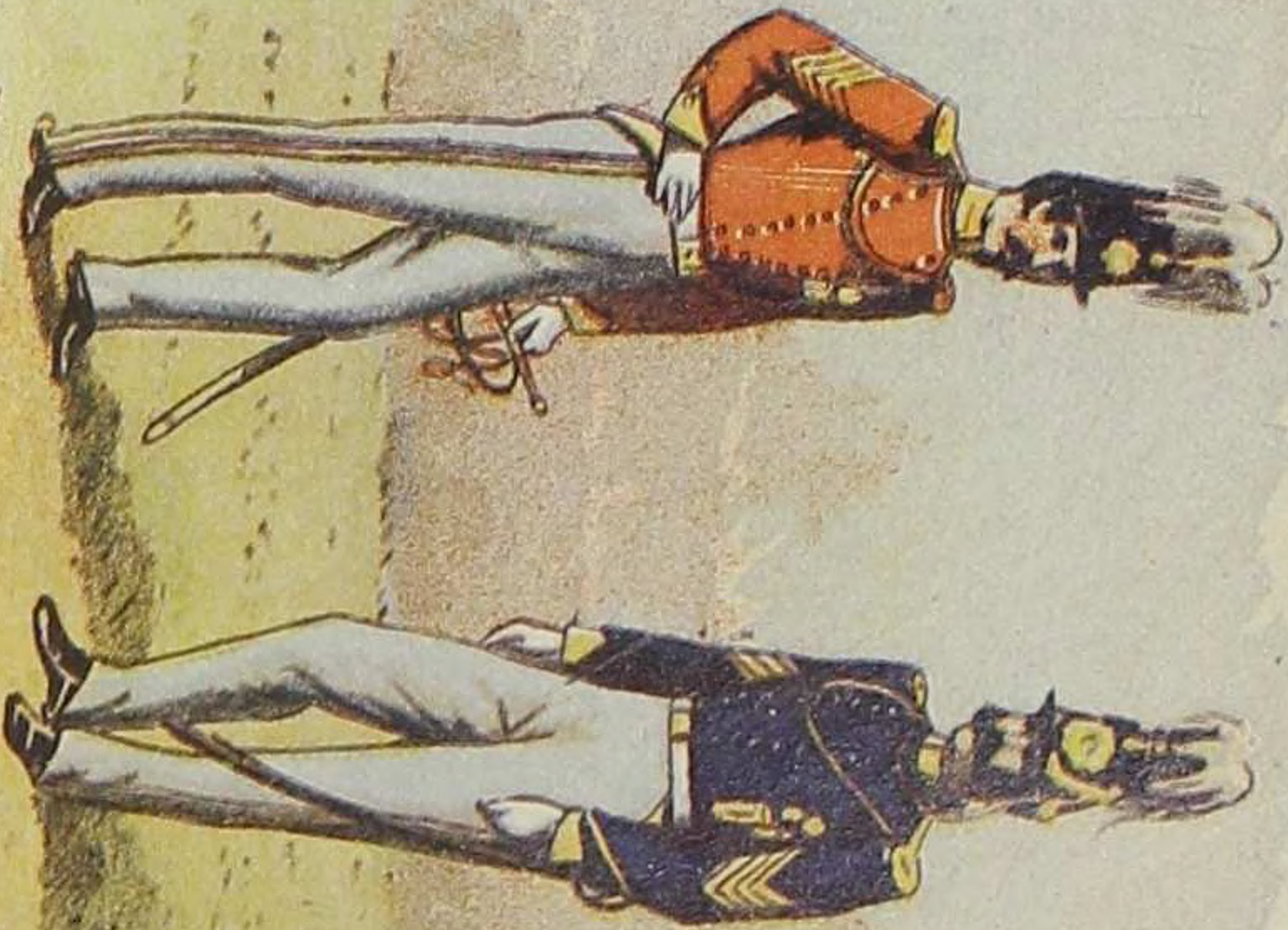


*E. FORBES.*

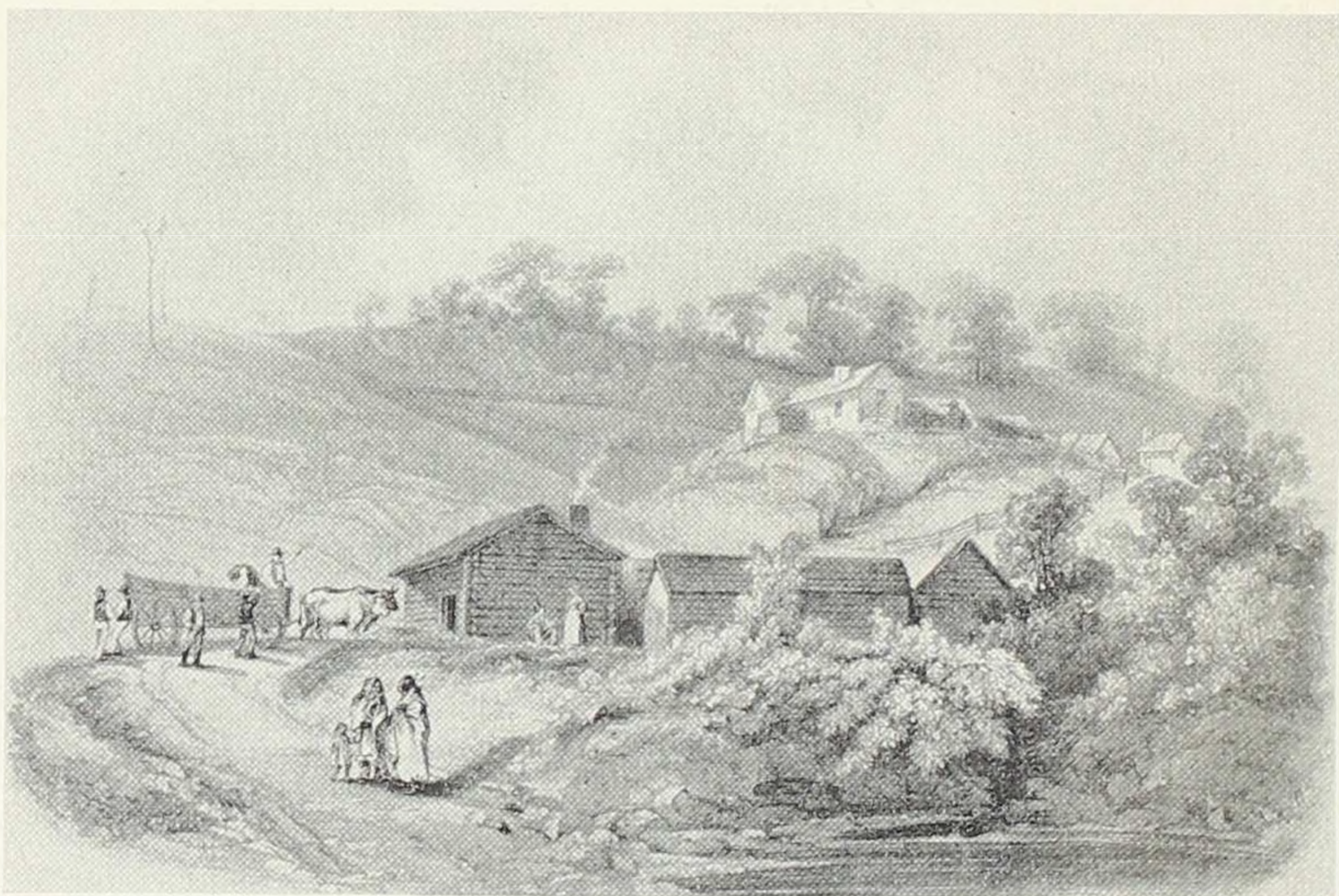


*One of the 'Forty'. 1841.*

*Chief Bugler - Sergt. Major. 1844.*







*Drawing by Charles Bodmer*  
 BelleVue, Major Dougherty's Post



*Drawing by Charles Bodmer*  
 Snags in the Missouri

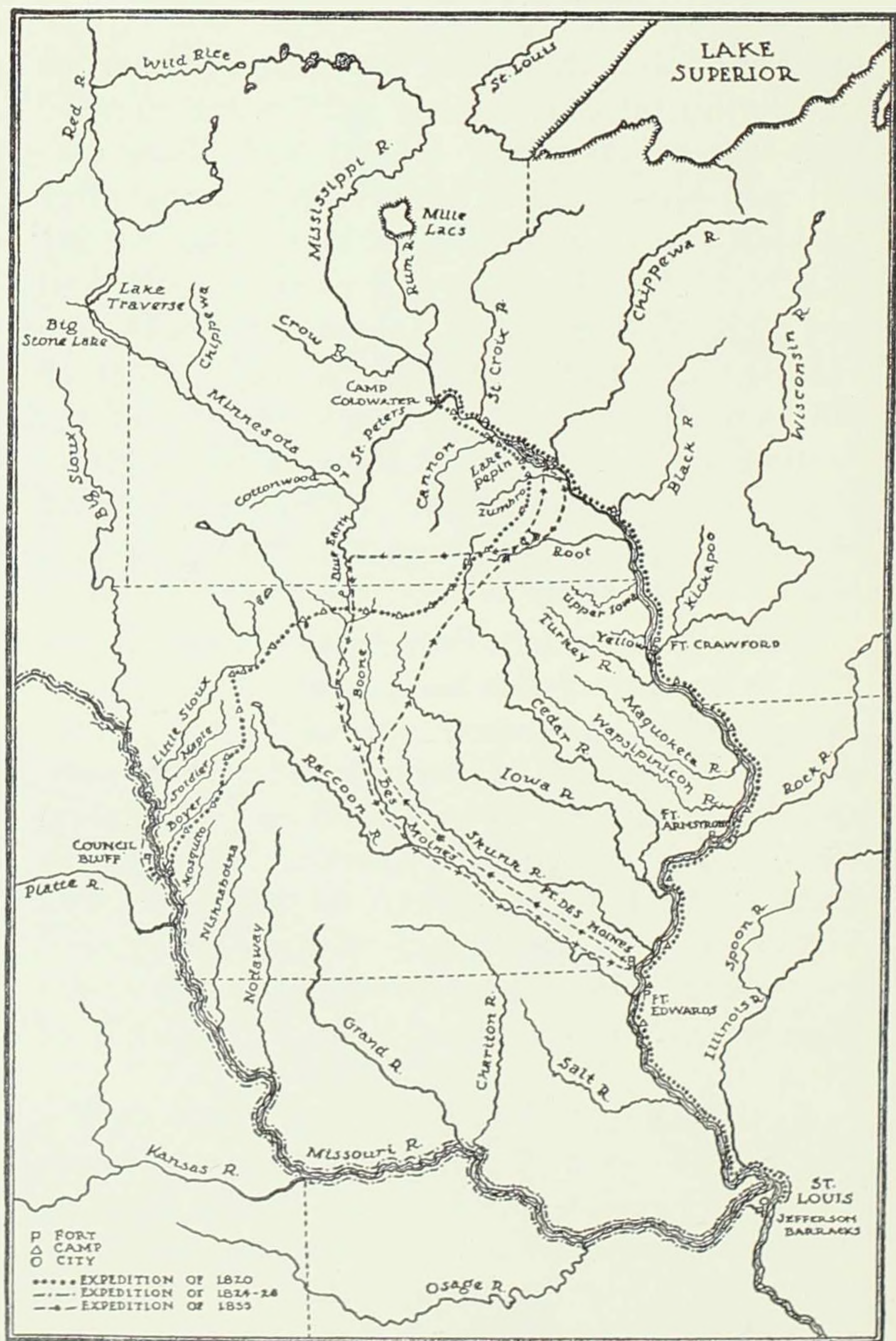


night and sweltering under the intense rays of the sun during the day, Kearny did not fail to make note of the "Ayauwa" (Iowa) and "Pole cat" (Skunk) rivers flowing into the Mississippi from the west. He described "Flint Hill" (Burlington) as a bluff six miles long and about one hundred feet high. The remains of "nine chimneys, & some Pickets, & scattering stones" marked the site of old Fort Madison. At sundown they started the descent of the Des Moines Rapids and arrived at Fort Edwards at midnight. There they found a lieutenant and twenty men stationed to guard against hostile Indians.

When Kearny left Fort Edwards on August 15th he had recorded in his journal a description of three hundred and twenty miles of the eastern border of Iowa as well as four hundred miles of prairie country between Council Bluff on the Missouri River and the Falls of St. Anthony. Altogether he had bounded the Iowa country on three sides. His vivid account of conditions in hitherto unexplored regions and along the Mississippi is one of the most valuable contributions to the early history of Iowa.

At the mouth of the Des Moines River, Kearny met the *Western Engineer*, the first steamboat known to have ascended the Mississippi that far. The explorers boarded the steamboat, but sandbars made navigation so uncertain that after progressing only fifteen miles in thirty hours, they re-







turned to their canoe. At Louisiana, on August 17th, they boarded a keelboat loaded with furs for St. Louis. For two days they moved slowly downstream on this clumsy craft. A little above Alton they again launched their canoe and arrived at St. Louis at five o'clock in the afternoon of August 19, 1820, twenty-two days after leaving Camp Coldwater and forty-nine from the time the expedition set out from Council Bluff.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN